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ABSTRACT

Much of the research on the topic of altruism reads as though the principal developmental problems which face the child are those of acquiring a repertoire of benevolent acts, and deciding under which circumstances those acts are to be put in play. The author suggests that any full inquiry into the developmental course of altruistic behavior must include attention to the processes by which children come to recognize and identify other people's needs, and frame responses which reflect this understanding. He further argues that altruism cannot be defined in exclusively behavioral terms, but must consider the intentions which underlie, as well as the consequences which follow upon, responses to the distress of others. The overly insular approach by other writers to the study of altruism leads the author of this paper to express the criticisms, concerns and counter suggestions described. By contriving assessment situation which tend to remove from subjects the obligation of recognizing the need for some altruistic gesture, and often relieving them of the responsibility of determining the particular type of help that might be required, research in this area has served artificially to separate altruism from the remainder of the child's socio-cognitive development. (Author/PC)

Knowing the sort of help that is really needed: A consideration of developmental prerequisites to effective helping behavior*

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Much of the research on the topic of altruism reads as though the principal developmental problems which face the child are those of acquiring a repertoire of benevolent acts, and deciding under which circumstances these skills are to be put in play. The tasks of recognizing when some altruistic response is called for, and deciding what sort of help is really needed tends, by contrast, to be given relatively short shrift. Standard laboratory procedures have typically short circuited these several difficult inferential steps by clearly identifying or dramatizing the plights of those in need of assistance, and by providing tailor-made altruistic solutions which a subject may or may not elect to adopt. Many of the studies concerned with sharing and other philanthropic gestures on the part of children are of this sort (Bryan & London, 1970). Other investigations (Midlarsky, Bryan & Brickman, 1973), while not explicitly programming subjects to express their altruistic impulses in predetermined ways, do set precedents for them by making available various models whose own altruistic responses may be taken as a standard of conduct. All of these investigations, while adding to our understanding of altruistic behavior, leave unsettled what are, at least for me, the most important and troublesome problems--those of deciding when, and what sort of, help is really needed.

Both children and adults are occasionally presented with situations of such high drama that the need for assistance is difficult to ignore, and the

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particular brand of benevolence required is patently obvious. Under such special circumstances altruism probably does reduce to a decision as to whether or not one should get involved. Under usual circumstances, however, things tend to be more opaque. Genuine pleas for help must often be heard with the third ear, and persous who, by objective standards, are in serious need of assistance are often loathe to accept it. A hair trigger predisposition to do good works seems not to be sufficient, and being truly helpful appears to require a capacity to appreciate situations from the perspective of the potential recipients of our benevolent acts. What should be done, for example, when one sees a small boy struggling with a man sized load, or precariously attempting a turn around the block on his first two wheeler? It is probably sometimes more important, I would suggest, to preserve the pride which goeth before a fall than to prevent the fall itself.

Even if one is able to accurately identify those situations in which help is required or acceptable, deciding on what should be done is often very puzzling. Although, on occasion, some kind of conventional, knee jerk helping response may prove to be appropriate, more often than not no pre-packaged brand of benevolence is available which provides the kind of help that is really needed. The confusion surrounding such tactical choices is highlighted, for example, by the diverse opinions which people hold about the proper handling of our welfare system. Charity is in certain circles, a four letter word,and what is regarded as a legitimate form of assistance by some is viewed as mollycoddling or degradating by others. Even when people manage to temporarily agree upon what is helpful and considerate, such conventions are rarely static and tend to shift beneath our feet. Even tried and true techniques for being helpful, like lighting cigarettes and opening doors for women, for example, can no longer be safely depended upon as establishing one's credentials as a considerate person.

The difficulties do not end here, however. Even if the necessity of and strategies for being helpful are obvious, as they frequently are in laboratory settings, how are we, as third party observers, to recognize an altruistic act when we see one? Is it sufficient to define as altruistic all of those behaviors, the consequence of which proves to be helpful? Should we, for example, regard Brer Bear's throwing of Brer Rabbit into the brier patch as an altruistic act? Thoughtless acts and intended cruelties often have serendipitous consequences which prove to be unintended windfalls for the person who they accidentally benefit. Conversely, not every benevolent stroke or act of intended generosity proves to be as well conceived or as charitable as was initially imagined. Tips on the horses and Christmas ties are only the start of a long list of things which often serve people less well than originally intended. Similarly, many self serving acts come camouflaged as helpful gestures. Children frequently respond to the question from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children which inquires as to why "Is it better to give money to an organized charity rather than to a street beggar" by suggesting, for example, that if you give to a charity you can take it off of your income tax. Without some understanding of the intentions which lie behind them, supposedly charitable acts, it would appear, may often be other than or less than they seem.

The upshot of all of these questions and concerns is, I would urge, that any full inquiry into the developmental course of altruistic behavior must include attention to the processes by which children come to recognize and identify other people's needs, and frame responses which reflect this understanding. In addition, I would argue, that altruism cannot be defined in exclusively behavioral terms, but must include reference to the intentions which underlie, as well as the consequences which follow upon, responses to the distress of others. Although some investigators (Deutsch & Susman, 1974) have chosen to regard these matters of social sensitivity, empathy, role-taking, and intentionality

as detachable prerequisites to, rather than facets of, altruistic behavior, I am not convinced that the concept will survive this kind of radical surgery. For this reason it would seem advisable to examine subjects in assessment situations in which the determination of the need for their intervention, and decisions regarding the particular brand of assistance required are left more in their own hands.

My own research, while not explicitly focussed on the problem of altruism as typically defined, has centered on the developmental process by which children come to recognize the thoughts and feelings of others, and to offer various kinds of helpful suggestions based on this understanding. The central issue under consideration in these studies has been the extent to which children of various ages and mental health statuses are able to distinguish between what they know and feel, and what is known and felt by others. To the extent that such distinctions are not properly drawn, subjects are prone to confuse what is true for them with what is true for others and, consequently, tend to behave toward others in ways which are often less than helpful. As such, they follow an overly concrete interpretation of the Golden Rule and literally do unto others as they would like to have done unto them. The problem, of course, is that a better and more genuinely altruistic rule of thumb would be to set aside one's own preferences and to do unto others as they would prefer to have done unto themselves. Following this more liberalized prescription requires, however, that subject be able to recognize affective and informational needs which are different from their own--an accomplishment which my own research (Chandler, 1972, 1973; Chandler, Greenspan & Barenboim, 1974) and that of others (Looft, 1972) suggests is often slow to be achieved. The consequences of such developmental delays in self-other differentiation for helping behavior are clearly demonstrated in some recent research which my co-workers and I have been doing in the area

of referential communication (Chandler, Greenspan & Barenboim, 1974). The particular procedure which we have used is a variation of a measurement strategy previously employed by Cowan (1966) and Krauss and Glucksberg (1969) and consists of presenting subjects with a 3 x 3 matrix into which they are asked to place a series of plastic objects of different sizes, colors and shapes (Greenspan & Barenboim, In Preparation). Having completed such a matrix they are then instructed to communicate the details of their construction in a way which will permit a second individual, who has access to similar material, to compose a design identical to their own. What is required, for the successful completion of this task, is the ability to distinguish between what is known to oneself and what is known to others, and to supply all of the information which would be necessary and helpful in permitting someone else to complete an identical design. Although I appreciate that the kinds of helping behavior indexed by such referential communication procedures are not of the sort usually associated with research in altruism, the skills required in distinguishing between one's own needs and those of others are formally similar in both instances and competence on such role-taking tasks would seem to be a necessary component of, and form a lower limit for, the kinds of interpersonal assessments demanded by more direct measures of altruism.

Although making adequate provision for assessing the ability of children to distinguish between their own and others' informational needs, research concerned with developmental changes in referential communication skills has almost nothing to say about a central ingredient of most altruistic events--the recognition and redress of other peoples' emotional needs. A literature which does speak more directly to this issue is the growing body of research concerning developmental changes in empathic skills. While a great deal of confusion still remains about the usefulness and feasibility of distinguishing between the processes of sympathy, empathy, social sensitivity and emotional contagion, the general

consensus which is emerging from this research is that, as they grow older, children become increasingly alert to the emotional needs of others, and evidence progressive changes in their ability to coordinate and organize this information (Chandler, in press). Whereas pre-school children frequently mistake their own feelings for those of others and are, consequently, prone to make sympathetic gestures which are not well-tailored to meet the emotional needs of others, older children gradually appear to sort out what is true for them and what is true for others, and acquire the capacity to respond in non-egocentric ways to other peoples' distress. In a recent study by some of my colleagues and I (Greenspan, Barenboim & Chandler, 1974), for example, first-graders were found to regularly overlook contradictory expressive cues and to jump to the conclusion that a stimulus character embroiled in an unhappy situation must, of necessity, himself be sad. Third-grade children, by contrast, evidenced qualitatively more complex, decentered inference strategies which reflected an attempt to come to terms with the range of contradictory expressive and situational cues provided. Unlike their younger counterparts, these older subjects were also less smug about their ability to determine exactly what it was that the stimulus character might be feeling. Although the subjects of this study were not required to offer suggestions as to how the stimulus person might be assisted in handling his feelings in this situation, it is probably fair to assume that the younger subjects would be prompted to proffer various kinds of sympathies and condolences, which the older subjects would be reluctant to presume where necessary or appropriate. As the sometimes recipient of premature sympathetic gestures, I, for one, would prefer that my own well wishers would more frequently behave like our third-grade subjects. Altruistic ambitions which are not backed up by a thoughtful and sophisticated understanding of the conditions which call them up are apt to result in some serious disservice and to offend those who resent

altruistic efforts which reflect a gross oversimplification of their intricate distress.

Like these studies in empathy and referential communication, other cognitive development research, concerned with issues of person perception, psychological causality and moral judgment, to name only a few, would appear to have an important bearing on the study of altruism. Research carried out by the Baldwins and their colleagues (Baldwin & Baldwin, 1970; Baldwin, Baldwin, Hilton & Lambert, 1969),concerning the manner in which acts of kindness are understood by persons of different ages,is of this sort. These data indicate that persons of various ages do not arrive at judgments concerning what should and should not qualify as acts of kindness by the same inferential route. Whereas the kindergarten and primary school children whom they tested were typically content to base their judgments of kindness solely on the basis of an assay of services rendered, older, college age adults tended to be equally concerned with the range of alternative courses of available actions and based their judgments on both what the story characters did and did not choose to do. These findings were interpreted as supporting the hypothesis that social judgments of young children are based on inferential models which are qualitatively different from and formally less complex than those employed by college age adults.

All of the criticisms and concerns and counter suggestions which I have made are based on an element of personal distress which I feel about what seems to be an overly insular approach to the study of altruism. By contriving assessment situations which tend to remove from subjects the obligation of recognizing the need for some altruistic gesture,and often relieve them of the responsibility of determining the particular type of help that might be required, research in this area has, in my opinion, served to artificially wall off altruism from the remainder of the child's socio-cognitive development. Like

Robert Frost "before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in or walling out, And to whom I was like to give offense" (Frost, 1964). While psychologists must often set one piece of a thing apart from another in order to have two things to pound together for experimental purposes, it is my own view that the developmental study of altruism would be better served if this process were more adequately preserved in its natural socio-cognitive context. Knowing how and when children are prompted to be helpful to one another will tell us very little unless we are also equally aware to how and when they come to know the sort of help that is really needed.

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